

The Impact of Nutrition Therapy on Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is a general term meaning inflammation of the liver, which is typically caused by infection. Hepatitis can also be caused by overexposure to alcohol, certain medications, chemicals, poisons and other toxins, or by other diseases. Inflammation of the liver caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV) is referred to as hepatitis C.

If the inflammation is not reversed, it becomes chronic and can cause chronic liver disease that can be serious or even fatal. At least 75 percent of people infected with hepatitis C develop chronic hepatitis C. If the disease progresses to the point at which the liver begins to fail, also referred to as end-stage liver disease, the only treatment is liver transplantation.

If hepatitis C is diagnosed early and the inflammation has not progressed to chronic liver disease or liver failure, nutrition therapy is essential to inhibiting further liver damage and maintaining a healthy liver.

More than four million people in the United States have been diagnosed with hepatitis C, and it is believed that at least another four million Americans have hepatitis C but have not been diagnosed. Approximately 80,000 new infections occur each year. U.S. Representative Hank Johnson (D-Ga.) is one such person who has been diagnosed with hepatitis C. He is working to raise awareness of the role nutrition therapy plays in controlling the disease.

Diet Recommendations

A poor diet sometimes can lead to liver problems. If your diet provides excess calories, you will gain weight. Being overweight is linked to the excess fat in the liver, often called "fatty liver." If you already have hepatitis C, a fatty liver will increase the risk for developing cirrhosis. Being overweight and having a fatty liver has also been shown to make it less likely that hepatitis C will successfully be cleared with interferon and ribavirin (both of which are common medications prescribed for hepatitis C patients).

A diet containing toxins and chemicals (alcohol, dyes, preservatives, hormones, etc.) that are harmful to the liver is especially detrimental to those suffering from hepatitis C. Over time, these toxins and chemicals cause additional damage. However, a healthy diet full of all-natural foods can actually improve liver health in a person with hepatitis C. A balanced diet can lead to better liver function and lower the risk of cirrhosis of the liver, all while maintaining a healthy immune system that is ready to fight off illness.

Research has also shown that people infected with hepatitis C have higher rates of diabetes than those who are not infected. A healthy diet can help reduce body fat therefore maintaining control of blood sugars which lowers diabetes risk.

Even though following a generally healthy diet and keeping a normal body weight may not seem like a specific treatment for hepatitis C, it is a great way of protecting your liver against hepatitis C damage. Maintaining a normal weight; eating a diet rich in healthy, all-natural foods; and regular exercise will help reduce inflammation in the liver, which will ultimately slow down the progression of cirrhosis from hepatitis C.

Dietary Tips for Managing Hepatitis C

- Eat balanced meals containing lean protein, fruits and vegetables, and whole grains
- Maintain a healthy calorie intake to maintain a healthy weight
- Eat whole-grain cereals, breads and grains, and avoid white processed flour and sugars
- Aim to eat 5-9 servings of fruits and vegetables (1 fruit: 3 vegetables) per day
- Get adequate protein by having 2-3 servings of lean poultry, fish or meat per day
- Avoid fatty, salty and sugary foods
- Drink a minimum of 64 ounces of water per day
- Avoid alcohol and recreational drug use

Researchers are conducting preliminary studies to determine the benefits of dietary supplement milk thistle; this supplement is the most commonly researched medication that's been shown to improve the quality of life for those who have hepatitis C. Ginseng and licorice root are other herbal supplements that have also been found to help those with hepatitis C. Some medications can put added stress on the liver, so always talk to your doctor about taking supplements and make sure they are manufactured by a company with NPA's certification for good manufacturing practices.

Eat Frequently

One way for people with hepatitis C to maintain energy levels throughout the day is by eating small meals or snacks at least every three to four hours.

If you are currently on hepatitis C treatment, eating often also can help prevent nausea, which is sometimes a side effect of the medicine.

Keep the small meals balanced with a variety of foods that will supply you with essential nutrients, such as:

- Whole-grain breads, cereals and grains
- Vegetables and fruits
- Low-fat dairy products
- Meats, fish, dried beans, soy, nuts and eggs

Whole Grains

Cereals, breads, pasta, tortillas and grits are full of B vitamins and minerals. Try to buy most of your grains as whole grains. Whole grains include the bran and the germ of the grain, and provide lots of fiber. Refined grains such as white bread and white rice have the bran and germ removed. Whole-wheat bread slices provide at least twice the amount of fiber, zinc, vitamin B6 and magnesium as white bread.

A food's color does not indicate whether it is whole grain. Bread can be brown because of molasses or other added ingredients. Foods labeled with the words "multi-grain," "stone-ground," "100% wheat," "cracked wheat" "seven-grain" or "bran" are usually not whole-grain products. Always read the ingredient list to see if the product is in fact whole grain; whole-wheat flour, not "enriched flour," should be the first item on the ingredient list.

Fruits and Vegetables

Aim to eat five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day. It's often recommended that you eat one fruit serving to every three servings of vegetables to ensure your caloric and sugar intake stay within daily recommendations. Fruits and vegetables are rich in antioxidants that help maintain a healthy immune system and promote proper gut function.

Low-Fat Dairy

If your body tolerates dairy, it's recommended that you consume one to three servings of dairy products per day. Aim for low-fat or fat-free dairy products such as skim milk, Greek yogurt or part-skim cheese.

Lean Protein

You should aim to consume a minimum of two servings of all-natural, lean cuts of protein from meat, poultry or fish per day. Look for proteins that have been certified as all-natural by the All-Natural Food Council of North America to ensure that the products meet the requirements to be labeled as all-natural. Beans, legumes, soy and eggs are also great sources of vegetarian protein.

You should always avoid high-fat and processed meats; over time, the fat can lead to a fatty liver and the extra chemicals contained in processed meats can put added strain and stress on the liver.

References:

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